

Explorations into Alpine Culture. Narratives of the Walsers and Alpine Folklore Studies

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Abstract

Knowledge about Alpine Culture played an important role for the epistemologization of folklore studies since the 1930s. By looking at the processes of the production and circulation of knowledge and using the example of the multidisciplinary project of the Walser research, the importance of folklore studies as a discipline of cultural studies of the Alpine region becomes visible. By doing research on the settler people of the Walsers in the Alps, these research endeavors constructed a broad and increasingly popular knowledge, with persistent after-effects even in contemporary society. The article also focuses on the often neglected connection between affirmative-conservative positions and the narrowness of their perspectives, which fit well into the political landscapes of post-war societies in Alpine countries.

Keywords: Alpine region, Walsers, historical and ethnographical research, history of knowledge, folklore studies, political functionalization, 1930s–1980s

1. Introduction

For a long time, it was one discipline in particular that felt competent to study the culture of the Alpine region: German-language folklore studies. From the 1880s onwards, this discipline institutionalized itself around topics of Alpine working and living environments and their material and immaterial culture, benefitted from political and ideological support in German-speaking countries starting in the interwar period, and enjoyed a corresponding new interpretative power. The occupation with questions of everyday culture and folklore with a focus on Alpine mountain farming was thus connected with

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specific attributions, constructions and expectations which linked scientific practice with political-ideological functionalization and led to diverse close relationships with political forces and ideologies. In this article, I will focus on these manifold explorations – and I understand them ambiguously: as specific explorations in field work in the Alpine area, but also as an epistemological search for stable research fields and topics, and third in a figurative sense as a search for political acceptance and social relevance of a scientific discipline that was still young in the 1930s. German-language folklore studies had long been shaped by its context of origin in German linguistics, but it was not until the nationalistic narrowing of the 1930s that it lost the anthropological, and often comparative, perspectives that had been present before. After 1945, the discipline was discredited by its *völkisch* (nationalistic) ideologemes in National Socialism and faced an institutional crisis from which, however, it recovered quite quickly by making use of its explanatory competence within new contexts. In doing so, knowledge from and about the Alpine region in particular was often only slightly adapted, provided with minor rhetorical shifts and fitted into new political conjunctures. It was not until the 1970s that we began to see a move away from this affirmative-compileatory *Volkskunde* (folklore studies) with its close orientation towards the state and political power in general as well as towards a historically arguing yet at the same time present-oriented cultural science, which today usually goes by the name of *Europäische Ethnologie* (European ethnology) or *Empirische Kulturwissenschaft* (empirical cultural studies). This was accompanied by profound shifts in terms of cognitive interests, methods and, associated with this, also political positioning.

The example of the Walser, a mountain people settling in the western and central Alps, can be used to illustrate the importance of folklore studies as a discipline of cultural studies of the Alpine region in processes of production and circulation of knowledge about culture in the Alps. The aim of my contribution is a reflexive-critical view on the Walser folklore studies, its affirmative-conservative narrowness and its persistent after-effects up to contemporary society.¹ Accordingly, this contribution will focus on the Walser folklore

1 For comments, discussions and their sharing of thoughts I am grateful to Anna Larl, Reinhard Boder and Werner Bätzing. For their help with the translation, my thanks goes out to Stefanie Everke Buchanan and to the Faculty of Philosophy and History at the University of Innsbruck (Austria) for its financial support.

studies which, over the course of the last century, set out to search for (and therefore also to find) whom Zinsli (1977) has called the Walser mountain colonist people. In doing so, it collaborated with Germanic dialectology, regional historiography, legal history, historical house and building research, geography, but also human genetics and physical anthropology.² At its peak from the 1930s until the 1960s, Walser folklore studies presents itself as a transdisciplinary and transnational scientific enterprise in the Alpine region of Switzerland, Italy, Liechtenstein and Austria – thus keeping with the proverbial cross-border research theme. The folkloristic area of responsibility within this collaborative research *avant la lettre* was (supposedly) clearly assigned. Folklore studies researchers, as Waibel (2007, p. 28) points out, took a close look at folklore, traditions and customs, at traditional dresses, utensils, houses and domestic landscapes. In the following considerations, the focus is on the reciprocal and close proximate relationship of actors in Walser folklore studies and the nodes that become visible in the process where resources, knowledge, institutions and interests connect in a variety of ways. This also serves to contribute to a deepening of the previous reflexive engagement in both the history of knowledge and the history of science with Walser research (among others, Loretz & Simonett, 1991; Moosbrugger, 2013; Niederstätter, 2013; Tschofen, 2014; Germann, 2017).

2. Being Walser: Mountain Peoples Everywhere

Anyone traveling in the Alps today will inevitably encounter them: between the Paznaun in northern Tyrol and the Alps of Vorarlberg, in the Aosta Valley in northern Italy, in the mountain settlements of Liechtenstein, in the villages and valleys of the Swiss canton of Graubünden and in the Upper Valais, traces of the Walsers can be found everywhere. Today, about 150 scattered villages in an area of the Alpine arc stretching over a distance of 300 kilometers are considered Walser settlements, and numerous place and valley names even bear this Walser origin in their names, such as the Großes Walsertal (Great Walser Valley) and the Kleinwalsertal (Little Walser Valley) in Vorarl-

2 For an overview of older literature, see Carlen (1973).

berg or the community of Alagna Valsesia in the northern Italian Piedmont (Waibel, 2014, p. 237). The Walsers were and are a *settler people* who live and farm on steep slopes and at the highest altitudes, who are closely connected to the harsh life in the mountains, who speak their own German-language dialect and have special customs. It is often said that this specific identity can be traced back to a common origin in the Upper Valais of Switzerland, from where the ancestors of today's Walsers emigrated in the Middle Ages. The common and widely accepted argument is that even the highest geographic locations are united by a pioneering settlement which can be seen, for example, in a specific construction method, in an experienced way of dealing with the hardships of nature, or in a special legal status.

Such assumed cultural knowledge about Walsers – used as a diffuse kind of historical generic term – is widely received and constantly reproduced today by numerous actors. Above all, it is mainly tourist players and associations that specialize in corresponding identity work who are active in this regard, first and foremost the Internationale Vereinigung für Walsertum (International Association for Walserism), founded in 1961, in which numerous regional Walser associations are united and which develops extensive activities in various national states. Thus, the four regional sections of Vorarlberg, Grisons, Liechtenstein and the Südwalsler (the Southern Walsers in Italy) organize a wide range of events, such as the International Walser Golf Tournament, the International Walser Games whose logo is not coincidentally reminiscent of the Olympic rings, specialized literary competitions, Walser Matinéeés and, as a highlight, the International Walser Meeting, which has been held every three years since 1962, with around 3,000 participants each time – in 2019 in the Swiss Lötschental and in 2022 in Ornavasso in northern Italy. The conscious emphasis on the adjective *international* alone points to the institutionalized form of this transnational Walser engagement. In addition to large-scale events, however, Walser hikes are organized along the various regional Walser trails, public festive parades with traditional costume groups and concerts are held, and various specialized journals are published.³ Besides this transnational association, the regional organizations also play a central role today, for example the Walservereinigung Graubünden (Walser

3 For example, the journals *Wir Walser* (We Walsers) (since 1961) or *Walserheimat* (Walser Homeland) (since 1967).

Association Grisons), which has existed since 1960, or the Voralberger Walservereinigung (Vorarlberg Walser Association) in which, in addition to the 17 Vorarlberg Walser communities, Galtür (Tyrol) and Triesenberg (Principality of Liechtenstein) are also listed as members. These diverse activities and the attributions associated with them have since justified and promoted a veritable *Verwalserung* (Walsering) of numerous areas of life, as cultural anthropologist Bernhard Tschofen (2014, p. 247) has aptly called it.

In these processes, a historically justified concept of identity is formulated which, however, is by no means purely directed at the past and nostalgically charged, but rather wants to be understood in the sense of a present-oriented everyday situation, for instance when it is stated on the association's website:

The Walsers form a piece of distinctive, independent existence in the Alpine region, and even today they are often characterized by that will to survive which ultimately made it possible for them to persevere for more than 700 years at the highest altitudes of our mountain world. But the Walser are not simply a rustic relic of times gone by. These people live in and with the mountains, and they have the will to do so also in the foreseeable future, and so here and there an Alpine herdsman has become an innkeeper or a furniture maker, and a mountain farmer's wife has become a hotel secretary or a village school teacher.⁴

In view of this current dominance of narratives charged with identity politics, it is easy to overlook the fact that the corresponding knowledge about the Walsers only started to circulate around the 1840s and has been increasingly present since the 1880s. It did not even begin to be negotiated among the general population until around 1920. Since then, scholarly interpretive power, ideological objectives, and everyday life practices continue to overlap and intermingle in a complex way. Walser knowledge in cultural studies,

4 „Die Walser bilden ein Stück unverwechselbares, eigenwilliges Dasein im Alpenraum, und sie sind auch heute noch oft von jenem Überlebenswillen geprägt, der es ihnen letztlich ermöglicht hat, während mehr als 700 Jahren in den höchsten Lagen unserer Bergwelt auszuharren. Die Walser sind aber nicht einfach ein urchiges Relikt aus vergangenen Zeiten. Diese Leute leben in und mit den Bergen, und sie haben den Willen, dies auch in absehbarer Zukunft zu tun, und so ist denn da und dort aus einem Alpsennen inzwischen ein Gastwirt oder ein Möbelschreiner und aus einer Bergbäuerin eine Hotelsekretärin oder eine Dorfschullehrerin geworden.“ <https://www.wir-walser.ch/die-walser/kultur> (accessed October 27, 2022; transl. by Stephanie Everke Buchanan)

to summarize it with a coarse-grained term in view of the broad and also somewhat diffuse elements, is thus comparatively young, but since then it has both experienced a steep career as well as made one for itself: Since the First World War, the corresponding knowledge has been differentiated in the interdisciplinary enterprise of Walser research and, in the process, has also been brought to the attention of a broad public, while at the same time experiencing what Tschofen (2014, p. 244) has called “a diverse and thoroughly contradictory ideological negotiation” in the upheavals and dictatorships of the twentieth century. Even if things have mostly gone quiet about the Walsers in scholarly disciplines today, corresponding narratives continue to be unbrokenly topical in popular contexts. In any case, little seems to have changed in the general attractiveness of identity-political and cultural hindsight, which is always fed by respective questions of the present.

3. Living at the Highest Altitudes. The Walser Question Between the Disciplines

The Walser question has occupied cultural and linguistic research since 1850, even if postulated extensions of corresponding questions, confidently formulated from circles of Walser research, exist that date them back to the 16th century (Rizzi, 1992; Waibel, 2003; 2007, pp. 45–48). In the course of this research, a bundle of theories became a rather compact model, as Niederstätter puts it (2013, p. 5), which functioned in a simplifying way and therefore also enabled connectivity for popular interpretations. Until about the middle of the 20th century, the dominant epistemological interest was the exact reconstruction of migratory movements, with the linguistic observation of the existence of German-speaking populations in otherwise Romansh- or Italian-speaking areas as the starting point. The close connection to linguistic-Germanic dialect research led to a precise – sometimes even somewhat microhistorically detailed – linguistic reconstruction of language development processes, which initially still argued beyond normative statements. This gratifyingly open perspective narrowed noticeably from the interwar period onward and led to emphatically one-dimensional statements which also found their counterpart in publicly performed festivities such as the Walser Heimattag (Walser homeland day) in

1929, whose identity-political goals were obvious (Tschofen, 2014, p. 245). Within this perspective, the German-language islands of the Walsers embodied, as it were, somewhat ideal cultural and spatial ethnicizing conceptions that asserted a connection between language and culture. Corresponding appellative concepts now evoked new emotional attractions that turned Walserism into a consciously deployed fighting term – Walser thus became a tribe and a people. Admittedly, this fit in with the tendencies of an enthusiasm for historically far-reaching, mythically narrated peoples that had been discernible since the 18th century, in which mountain peoples in particular were assigned a special significance in travel narratives and historical treatises.

Nevertheless, national identities could only be partially justified with reference to the migrating Walsers, but the linguistic findings provided ammunition for argumentative demarcations and ideologized exaggerations. Language thus became a central argument in Walser research focusing on descent, alongside a perpetuating emphasis on what Waibel has called the colonizing achievements of the Walsers in the form of clearing, settling, and cultivating high-altitude, high-precipitation mountain areas (2014, p. 238). From this, specific legal positions were derived, the so-called Walser right, which supposedly went hand in hand with a high degree of autonomy and with a free right of inheritance. The themes of colonization and particular legal positions both proved to be ideologically compatible with an increasingly discernible idealization and preference for mountain farming activities and the civilization achievements associated with them; especially since these were perceived as German-speaking settlers, which meant that arguments of exclusion and marginalization could be put into place along so-called language borders. In an essentialist understanding, language as a cultural form was thus inscribed in a specific space and, as a supposedly stable quantity, immunized not only against obviously fearful notions of dynamics, but also against any complexities. From the 1910s on, such holistic views of a Germanness of the Walsers were increasingly emphasized, whereby the interpretation typical of the time, which was thus applied, became unambiguous at the latest with the racial designation as “Herrenvolk” (master race) (Helbok, 1927, p. 75).⁵ The German vernacular language with high Alemannic

5 On Adolf Helbok (1883–1963) see also the works by Johler (1994a), Pesditschek (2019) and Kuhn & Larl (2020).

components from immigrant Upper Valais dialects remained in any case the central argument of Walser culture, with elaborate attempts being made to stylize other elements correspondingly as unique features of a common origin from the Swiss Rhone Valley, such as architectural characteristics, work techniques in cattle and dairy farming, material cultural materializations or specific customs: Even if such cultural forms are, according to today's understanding, part of the common heritage of all inhabitants of the Alpine region, such demarcation efforts, supported by folkloristic knowledge production, have been booming for decades. Thus, for example, the *Seelenfensterchen* (little soul window) as a small opening in the wooden exterior wall of the house, which was supposed to allow the soul of the deceased to leave, experienced an astonishing career as a claimed characteristic of an ethnically shaped typology of houses of the allegedly typical Walser house (Zinsli, 1954, pp. 263–264; Kuhn, 2001; Stäheli, 2002a, p. 18; Budmiger, 1982, pp. 39–57). Another example of such entrenched univocality is the long-perpetuated opposition of the individualistic principle of the Walser single farm settlement with the typical Walser houses (Weiss, 1941, p. 13) versus village settlements of the Romansh or Italian-speaking population, which has only been revised in recent years (Freund, 2007, p. 38; see also Simonett, 1965, pp. 191–193).

Increasingly from the 1920s onwards, corresponding bodies of knowledge experienced a politically promoted surge which ran parallel to the beginning dissemination and the emphasizing narrowing of narratives about the Walsers which now also began to circulate outside of academic milieus. Linguistic and legal historical interests continued to dominate this research, which often examined charters and whose findings often materialized in cartographic representations. These maps formed a central knowledge format of Walser research, which, with numerous arrows depicting the settlement question, at the same time successfully concealed the historical vagueness and incorporated assumptions of the findings. Another preferred format were (and still are) richly illustrated monographs in the mode of total and conclusive access, the history, Alemannic language, field and family names, stories and legends, but also folkloric topics of a specific Walser place were described more in a compiling manner than analyzed in an interpreting manner (see for example Budmiger, 1982; Rizzi, 1981, 1992; Donatsch, 1994; Zanzi & Rizzi, 2018). While the focus initially was on comparative-reconstructive questions

of this so-called migration of peoples and its motives, it soon became clear that the settlement was not so much realized by a group travelling through the Alps with luggage and cattle, as it was depicted in popular images, but rather a land seizure that took place over centuries and was organized by manorial planning. In view of the generally thin sources, even the repetitively cited motives for the migration from the Valais, which ranged from overpopulation to natural disasters to climate change, remained primarily speculative (see Viazzo, 1989, pp. 127–135, for new findings related to this question).

Nevertheless, corresponding simplified statements are still circulating today and can be found in school materials, tourist publications, but also on websites, such as that of the Virtuelles Walsermuseum (Virtual Walser Museum)⁶ on which cross-regional elements of the Walser sites are to be presented. Closely related to this are tourist offers such as the Walser trails (for example on the Walserweg Graubünden/Walser Trail Grisons which opened in 2010, see Schuler, 2020) or alleged gastronomic inventions that establish references to the Walsers, where corresponding processes of valorization are very well known from similar contexts and with at best other historical reference points. And also in the numerous existing literary adaptations, set pieces of the Walser material can be found in diverse and regional variations.⁷

A central figure in the networks researching the Walsers was Paul Zinsli (1906–2001), who worked as a lecturer for language, literature and folklore of German-speaking Switzerland at the University of Bern from 1946–1971, and who himself came, as Waibel (2007, p. 30) writes, from an old Safer Walser family, which undoubtedly helped him gain increased legitimacy with regard to his research subject. His *Walser Volkstum. In der Schweiz, in Vorarlberg, Liechtenstein und Italien. Erbe, Dasein, Wesen* (Walser folklore. In Switzerland, in Vorarlberg, Liechtenstein and Italy. Heritage, existence, essence), first published in 1968 and now in its 7th edition, has remained the fundamental and most cited work to this day. Moreover, the interpretations presented here circulated – and this is central for the penetrating power of corresponding set pieces that is still present today – not exclusively in academic circles, but

6 <https://walsermuseum.ch/> (accessed October 27, 2022).

7 Often cited for Vorarlberg for example Welte (1939/1983), on the Walsers in Bosco Gurin in southern Switzerland e. g. Schneider (2006), while the novel is explicitly based on the folklore research undertaken by Tomamichel (1953).

rather also and especially among the general population. This circumstance is explicitly addressed by Peter Loretz (2002) as president of the Walserviceinigung Graubünden (Walser Association of Grisons) in his preface to the 7th edition, who remarks that it was also Paul Zinsli's merit to have made the Walser themselves aware of their origin, their nature and their heritage with the publication of this book as well as numerous essays. Loretz continues that it was therefore not without reason that Walser Volkstum had become a popular book in the best sense of the word that could also be found in many parlors in which books were rather a rarity. Zinsli made significant corrections to various elements of a common Walser heritage (as he subtitled a central chapter of his book) that had been claimed since the 1930s. He argued overall for a diffusionist view according to which elements uniting all Walsers hardly existed but in which much had developed in exchange with neighbors. Above all, Zinsli emphasized the unifying language, the most essential feature being a sch sound instead of an s otherwise common in the German language. Zinsli, on the other hand, still presented and thus validated findings of unifying racial or physical-somatic characteristics from blood group research and human genetics (Zinsli, 1986, pp. 11, 65, 182).⁸ Since his monumental work, the topic appears today according to a positivist understanding of the older Walser research as supposedly largely exhausted. Even though the discovery of the Walsers and the scientific construction of corresponding projections did not remain without consequences: Especially in local contexts and presented in popular formats, this knowledge circulated among village elites.⁹ This effect had already been soberly noted by Zinsli in the 1950s on the occasion of an excursion to Vorarlberg, on which Zinsli reflected that through scientific and popular writings, through the school, and most recently also through work dedicated to the preservation of folklore in the valley itself, knowledge of the immigration of the ancestors had been spread (Zinsli, 1954, p. 243).

Not surprisingly, scientific interpretations using cultural arguments also had an effect on the self-perception of the Alpine population. When, at the

8 See also Germann (2016, pp. 262–274 and 359–377) on the human genetic research in the so-called Walser isolates of the 1950s, which was based on earlier surveying projects. The research continuities and interactions between folklore studies and medicine in Walser villages should be systematically examined.

9 The corresponding processes were reconstructed by Moosbrugger (2013) and Niederstätter (2013).

end of the 1960s, the rejection of the existence of unifying cultural characteristics became established as a finding of decades of research, this caused resistance in terms of identity politics among the inhabitants of the Walser regions, which manifested itself not only in the vehement defense of fictions that had become popular, but also in concrete efforts to document a corresponding *Walser-Bewusstsein* (Walser awareness) (Bischof, 2012). This was to be undertaken, for instance, within the framework of the INTERREG project Walser Alps¹⁰, funded by the European Union from 2005 onwards, which stated as a premise that one could and even had to assume that essential elements of Walser culture were brought with them from the country of origin and naturally further developed in the new area (Steffen, 2007, p. 19). Accordingly, surveys were conducted to find out whether and in which regards older people from different Walser areas felt a kindred spirit. The desire to find a sense of belonging among the Walsers beyond language proves the attractiveness of the idea of a common identity, which is even asserted with an ethnic basis via a so-called self-image as a group and an ethnicity.¹¹ This positive understanding of a special position – being Walser as something special – and the self-identification derived from it must not, however, be reduced solely to effects of past cultural research interests; even if it is unmistakable that historical-cultural research and the formation of collective identity constructions have always been closely linked and even, as Moosbrugger puts it, have been effective in an extraordinary way in terms of mental history (2013, p. 18).¹²

4. “Dilettant Folklore Studies”. Karl Ilg and the Walsers in Vorarlberg

Today, there is a widespread consensus in Walser research that, beyond linguistic affinities, ultimately little that unites the Walsers could be brought to light and that they must therefore be understood historically more as

¹⁰ <http://www.walser-alps.eu/kontakt/projekt-walser-alps> (accessed January 4, 2022).

¹¹ Apparently, there are even racial-ethnic concepts of Walser blood in some cases, see Nachbaur (2013, p. 109).

¹² Moosbrugger (2013, pp. 17–18) refers to the municipality of Tannberg and the Kleine Walsertal as examples, which have emphasized their Walser descent since 1920, although this had not been known in the 1840s.

contextualized communities of purpose than in the sense of an ethnic history of descent. Nevertheless, from the 1930s on, exclusionary tones and exaggerations were present which shaped local historical and regional ethnographic studies to quite a decisive extent. The approaches of the former geographer and later folklorist Karl Ilg can be used as an example to make the epistemological interests but also the formative premises and political ideologemes of this cultural research tangible.¹³ A comparative look at his numerous works shows – in addition to often verbatim adoptions from his own already published texts on the Walser topic¹⁴ – an emphasis on ethnic constructions of origin of the Walser mountain farmers practicing cattle breeding and dairy farming. This amalgamation of ethnic and natural geographic argumentation and an evocative exaltation of what Ilg called their heroic life in the constant struggle with the rigors of mountain nature (Ilg, 1956, p. 9) fit ideally into the scientific and political ideas of his Innsbruck patron and, as he put it, highly revered teacher Hermann Wopfner and his motif of longing for an unadulterated and unspoiled mountain farmer existence.¹⁵ Ilg himself later positioned the Walsers as mountain farming theme which was, as he stated, in keeping with Wopfner's school. He later framed the Walsers within a so-called "folklore on the border" which captivated him throughout his life (Ilg, 1984, p. 19). Ilg described the settlement of the Walser in "our country" and in their mature political and legal order a peculiarity of these mountain farmers who had asserted themselves in their tenacious and successful struggle with the forces of nature and with the peculiar structure of their economies and way of life, had cultivated their soil and secured and secured their survival thanks to strength and perseverance (Ilg, 1949, p. 7). In doing so, he combines reactionary-conservative ideas with anti-modern reflexes which all too easily coalesced with ideological programs. Thus, Karl Ilg's research interest in the Walsers in Vorarlberg was directed less toward historically traced movements of migration and historiographic evidence from archives, but rather toward the

13 On Karl Ilg (1913–2000) see Jöhler (1994b), Heimerdinger & Kuhn (2020, pp 157–179) and Kuhn (2021).

14 On this, see already Moosbrugger (2013, p. 23).

15 On Hermann Wopfner (1876–1963) see Meixner & Siegl (2019). Ilg's rapturous reference to Wopfner cited after Ilg (1995, p. 231).

formation of what he called the character traits in the face of a people which he imagines from an ethnographic perspective in the folkloristic themes of land appropriation, economic methods and way of life, and hence in what he described as “attachment to the soil” – a phrase that also constitutes the subtitle of his study on the Walsers in Vorarlberg, published in 1949 (Ilg, 1949). This study of the Walsers in Vorarlberg, compiled under difficult post-war conditions (Rachberger, 1990, pp. 49–50) by means of observation in many wanderings through the Walser areas¹⁶, enabled Ilg to obtain his habilitation in the discipline of folklore studies at the University of Innsbruck in 1946 (Johler, 1994b, p. 596), with Hermann Wopfner, as chairman of the habilitation committee, attesting to Ilg’s study that it demonstrated the high value of folkloristic contemporary research for problems of economic history.¹⁷ Zinsli, too, wrote in a private letter that he had been impressed by the sovereign knowledge not only of scientific problems and the relevant literature but also of the country and the living people; however, he then also ambiguously emphasized that the study showed an unmistakable love of the homeland.¹⁸ All in all, Ilg’s research, published in rapid succession shortly after the end of the war (Ilg, 1947), experienced a surge of interest until the mid-1960s, enabling him to rise to become what Assmann called the merited Walser scholar (Assmann, 1969) who not only had a regional identity-forming effect but also owed his academic career at the University of Innsbruck and his secure position in Vorarlberg’s regional politics to his work on the Walser problem (Ilg, 1957) and its connectivity to conservative regional political networks (Kuhn, 2021; Johler, 1994a). His interest in processes of colonization of what Stäheli refers to as a late inner-Alpine migration (Stäheli, 2002a, p. 5) and its effects on economic forms in the Alps (Ilg, 1952), for which he found ideal-typical materializations in the colonizing axe and the grass-cutting scythe (in distinction to the plow of the arable

16 Meinrad Tiefenthaler: Letter to Dr. Karl Ilg, March 1, 1949, in: Landesarchiv Vorarlberg, Rep. 14-338: Nachlass Karl Ilg, Schachtel 1.

17 Hermann Wopfner: Assessment of the Habilitation of Dr. Karl Ilg, July 4, 1946, in: Universitätsarchiv Innsbruck, Philosophische Fakultät, Habilitationsakten nach 1945, Habilitationsakt „Karl Ilg“.

18 Paul Zinsli: Letter to Karl Ilg, April 29, 1950, in: Landesarchiv Vorarlberg, Rep. 14-338: Nachlass Karl Ilg, Schachtel 1.

farmers), was always dominant.¹⁹ The exaltation of the work of what Ilg called the Alpine pioneers, their imposing achievement and the development of strength, namely of the German people in the Alps located in the late medieval inner colonization which was thus invoked in ever new works was imbued with a nostalgic admiration for imagined continuities that was at the same critical modernization: He wrote that he who had passed the test in the multiple struggle at the border of the ecumene will master life everywhere; the Walsers, however, had not only mastered it 600 years ago but had persevered unbroken to the present day for 650 years in an unbroken lineage of succession (Ilg, 1963c, p. 122). Ilg also remained true to his fascination with what he saw as the nature of colonizing peoples in his later work insofar as he began to turn his attention to whom he described as the ethnic German colonists in South America in the late 1960s, and significantly, it was again their agricultural implements that were examined first (Ilg, 1971). As organic as these research developments of Ilg's present themselves at first glance, he also understood his persistently pursued search for the nature of people at the borders in the same organically grown way (Ilg, 1983, p. 139). In doing so, he not only insisted on ethnicizing-holistic concepts of culture, but also overlooked (or perhaps more precisely: consciously ignored) racist structures of domination in colonial and postcolonial contexts in South America.

After the second volume of Ilg's *Die Walser in Vorarlberg* (1956) was published, the Swiss folklorist Richard Weiss, as an expert on Walser Alpine life and Walser culture (1941, p. 2), reviewed his study and let it be known in his reserved-diplomatic manner what he thought of this work:

So if we do not find much peculiarly Walser in this Walser volume – in contrast to the settlement and material culture of part 1 – it nevertheless results in a highly appealing and lively local monograph, a folklore study that is dilettante in the best and most actual sense, because it elaborates, out of a loving attachment to the homeland, the most humanly appealing features of a mountain population

19 Particularly the scythe and what he called its development and importance (Ilg, 1948) received specific attention. He also devoted a separate chapter in Ilg 1949 (pp. 139–143) to this, in his words, important device of the scythe. See also Ilg (1963c, pp. 119–120).

that was once again severely affected by the avalanche winter of 1954. (Weiss, 1956, p. 236)²⁰

Carefully hidden between the lines, a questioning of the premises of Walser research can be discerned here in that the second volume of Ilg's research was downgraded to a "local monograph", which was nevertheless presented as justified in view of its motivation from "loving attachment to the homeland", especially against the background of e. g. the avalanche catastrophes in Großes Walsertal (the two Walser communities of Blons and Fontanella were particularly affected). It is not known whether and how Ilg reacted to this review, but it does not seem to have been detrimental to his admiration for the Swiss folklorist. Nor did Ilg allow himself to be dissuaded from his affirmative approach to the Walser theme; on the contrary, he reinforced his "dilettante" approach in the context of his involvement in the institutionalized Walser organization which developed from the early 1960s onward. He was active in the founding of the Vorarlberger Walservereinigung (Vorarlberg Walser Association) and in the first volume of the journal *Wir Walsers. Halbjahresschrift für Walsertum* (We Walsers. Biannual Journal for Walserism), he was represented with two essays and had been directly approached to contribute.²¹ Karl Ilg fulfilled the expectations placed in him by proving to be an eager proponent of Walser concerns in these texts as well and by reaffirming the regional-political argument of a shaping of Vorarlberg by Walser immigration between the 13th and 15th centuries that has been effective up to the present. In this context, his statements regarding the relationship between science and the population are interesting since he assumes that Walser research since the last century had shed light again on these questions that had long remained in the dark, while the people themselves had never lost the awareness of Walserism (Ilg, 1963b, p. 2, as cited in Stürz et al., 1979,

20 "Wenn wir also in diesem Walserband – im Gegensatz zu Siedlung und Sachkultur des 1. Teils – nicht viel eigenartig Walserisches finden, so ergibt sich doch eine höchst ansprechende und lebendige Lokalmonographie, eine im besten und eigentlichsten Sinne dilettantische Volkskunde, weil sie aus liebevoller Heimatverbundenheit die menschlich ansprechendsten Züge einer durch den Lawinenwinter von 1954 erneut schwer betroffenen Bergbevölkerung herausarbeitet." (Transl. by Stefanie Everke Buchanan)

21 The journal published by the International Association for Walserism still exists today: <https://www.wir-walser.ch/zeitschrift> (accessed October 27, 2022). The invitation is addressed in the first sentence, where Ilg (1963b, p. 1) writes that if the leadership of meeting of Walsers and Walser scholars presented him with his topic, then. See also the review article written by Ilg (1963a) with which the journal founded its existence, as it were.

p. 203). This bold and thinly sourced argumentative line was later completely reversed by Ilg, as a commemorative speech from 1992 shows:

Today's commemoration day undoubtedly deserves [...] to be honored. Twenty-five years ago, things looked differently, and if we go back even further than 1967, namely to the eighties of the last century, we are faced with the fact that the *Walsers* also knew nothing or very little about their origins and thus at that time very strange theories of origins could develop, and these were even associated with Saracen invasions of the Valais. Fortunately, it was at this very moment that scientific research began in a wide variety of fields.²²

In these remarkable shifts, the uncertain ground on which the Walser research was based becomes recognizable – uncertain and questionable related to the hardly empirical methodical procedure, as well as to the guiding epistemological premises being permeated by ideologemes. Only with respect to their effect, there is no doubt: The cultural identification offers had a high docking potential, which is not least shown by the fact that they have since, as Tschofen puts it, deeply inscribed themselves in the memory of the regions (2014, p. 238).

5. The Attraction of Being Different in the Alpine Region – Ethnic Attributions and its Retarding Effects

With reference to a common historical origin, people in widely separated regions of the Alpine region feel connected today. This need proves to be strong. It forms local identities, offers identity-forming narratives and thus manifold resources for tourist uses, but it also facilitates local positioning

22 „Der heutige Gedenktag verdient zweifellos, [. . .], ausgezeichnet zu werden. Vor 25 Jahren sah es noch anders aus und gehen wir noch weiter als 1967 nämlich in die Achtzigerjahre des letzten Jahrhunderts zurück, dann stehen wir vor der Tatsache, daß auch die Walser nichts mehr oder nur sehr wenig von ihrer Herkunft wußten und so sich damals sehr eigenartige Herkunftstheorien entwickeln konnten und diese sogar mit Sarazenenereignissen ins Wallis in Verbindung gebracht wurden. Glücklicherweise setzte gerade in diesem Augenblick die wissenschaftliche Forschung auf den verschiedensten Gebieten ein.“ Karl Ilg: Manuskript der Festrede, 25-Jahrfeier der Gründung der Voralberger Walservereinigung in Raggal, 17. Juni 1992, in: Landesarchiv Voralberg, Rep. 14-338: Nachlass Karl Ilg, Schachtel 10. (Transl. by Stefanie Everke Buchanan)

and historical retrospectives of present life. Folkloristic research on the Alpine region has helped to construct those knowledge bases and projections that are attractive today precisely because of their empirically thin foundations. It is indeed this openness and indeterminacy of a Walser culture, constructed by means of barely secured traditions, that make it so plausible as an interpretive offer for a collective self-understanding. The cultural-scientific study of the Alpine region has produced bodies of knowledge with which not only continuities and a proverbial long duration can be asserted, but above all the existing diversities can be combined and leveled in a supposed sameness. Even if it will certainly remain necessary to deconstruct such processes from the perspective of empirical cultural studies and to criticize the exclusionary tendencies that are always inherent in these hierarchical regimes of knowledge, the challenge for ethnographic research that is associated with this also becomes visible. The goal of such research should be to investigate the everyday effectiveness of identity-specific argumentations as well as the heuristic potential of corresponding positions for further reflexive research.²³ The offensively oriented postulates of a typical Walser identity can certainly be read as a strategic self-empowerment of people, valleys and regions whose chances of positioning themselves in the competition for attractiveness and location marketing are not always among the best. A particularistic being Walser can thus also be understood as a potential remedy against the threatening oblivion of remote regions. In the course of the challenges facing the Alpine regions in view of the anthropogenic climate catastrophe, backward movements that are critical of modernization and come in the guise of an almost defiant emphasis on being Walser can also be conceived of as resistant search movements for a better future. At the same time, it remains unmistakable that the self-narratives propagated in this way in turn formulate marketable references and facilitate tourist orientations. A Walser identity would thus point to a new quality of reference to those places of life that articulate a specific being-in-the-world and an associated responsibility for the local beyond ideological emphasis on the homeland. A certain internal exoticism of being different as a special mountain people is probably the price consciously

23 Kathrein (2016, pp. 210–214) illustrates this with examples from Galtür in the Paznaun Valley, the “only village in Tyrol with Walser roots”. On the attractiveness of local identity politics see also the impressive studies by Heady (1999) and Stacul (2003).

chosen by the population, whose currency would not exist without the contradictory commitment of the Walser folklore of former times.

All in all, the young discipline of folklore studies benefited from the increased public attention it received as an agency for researching and safeguarding cultural knowledge, which manifested itself in a newly acquired reputation as well as in a clear institutional upgrading within the disciplinary landscape, but also quite specifically at and among those with political responsibility. The study of the Alpine region thus helped folklore studies to gain institutional-political legitimacy, public attention and, last but not least, research thematic responsibilities. During this time, cultural research related to origin experienced such a surge of activity in the variously interwoven Alpine regions because the scientific interest localized there made it possible to satisfy speculative longings as well as political programs. Consequently, the Alpine region as a postulated guiding category had a formative effect for many decades after the differentiation of national scientific landscapes, although it was also always self-limiting to a great extent. In Austria, for example, the discipline was able to continue its exaltation of Alpine peasant knowledge largely uninterrupted after 1945. In the case of Austria, the associated continuities also had an internal effect, in that the preference for epistemologies with a folk accent, but now related to Austria, made possible a "folkloristic family peace" that held together a folklore studies that had hardly been renewed after 1945. This was also true for the discipline in Switzerland, which, thanks to resources secured through Alpine research, was able to satisfy political preferences and corresponding research. The corresponding searching movements in the Alpine region ultimately delayed not only the site-specific re-formation of the discipline at the universities in Switzerland and Austria through the adoption of new, present-oriented analytical perspectives and social science methods, but also resulted in a methodological and reflexive delay of folklore studies that was going to have an impact for years.

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